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One Hundred and Fifty Percent Elasticity

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ONE HUNDRED FIFTY PERCENT ELASTICITY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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Richmond, Virginia
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Abstract

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The sculptural environments I create immerse the viewer in a decrepit vaudevillian past. The sculptures allude to narratives within Community Theater as well as the Drag Show. Making becomes an act; manipulating materials such as synthetic hair and paint are associated with the guise of the makeup artist. Frantic rehearsal logic prevails as a dress is repurposed into a male giant's costume and window blinds are used to construct a boat's deck. This collusion asks the viewer to transgress the boundary of the stage, becoming a voyeur privileged to the world of exiled props and role reversal.

From Farce to Tragedy

As lines from a play are recited from one era to the next, a narrative's tone naturally changes as different actors assume the same role. Coaxing forth-new life in familiar constructs, directors must work with these actors, costume makers, makeup artists, and set designers to re-represent the play and to bring the written word of the playwright to life. Inevitably, there is drama behind the curtain.



{Figure 1: Installation View *From Farce to Tragedy*} sculptures included in installation from front to back
 {*The Tranquil Sea and the Ship's Deck, Featuring Alvion Arnell, A Once Suspended Tableau, Drama Club Dress Rehearsal*}

The Tranquil Sea and the Ship's Deck, Featuring Alvion Arnell is a sculpture that addresses the division between stage and backstage. The piece refers to a historic

houseboat that was made from an oil tank. Navigating the boat's deck becomes a metaphor for traversing what is presented upon the stage. As the viewer circles the boat, words such as "heart", "hairs", "flowers", "agonies", "touch'd", and "reputation" resonate from beneath the deck's floorboards. The back interior of the boat serves as a framing device for a video projection of Alvion Arnell. Alvion adorns his face with makeup. Caught in the role of the voyeur, the viewer witnesses the drag queen in the midst of private rehearsal, practicing a monologue entitled "A Woman Killed With Kindness."

A boat is like an isolated island, floating in the water in its own world. *The Tranquil Sea and the Ship's Deck, Featuring Alvion Arnell* exists between male and female, between theatrical and cinematic space, between handmade and found objects. Transforming the found object, I become the theatrical director, capable of reassigning roles at a whim. I free found materials from their traditional roles in society. Plastic store signs advertising "*Diamond District*" and "*Men's*" are cut and rearranged into backstage floor tiles. Repurposed wooden blinds slats create the stage front/boat's exterior deck. The original function of the object conflicts with its reassigned role. Blinds, which once created an interior private boundary, are placed on the exterior, and private space is tiled with signs from a commercial store. Drastically varying materials and their application creates a sense of visual variation, which coincides with the hierarchy of roles that contribute and ultimately culminate in a theatrical event. Monologues of adultery, an oil tank converted into a houseboat, and a drag queen all reflect a world in which roles and relationships are constantly in flux.

In *Drama Club Dress Rehearsal*, I assumed the role of a director who must represent the fable, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. I became obsessed with finding a way to represent the giant, a character of fantastical stature. I combed through the history of giants from *Jack and the Beanstalk* productions from the last hundred years. Unsatisfied with actors on stilts wearing bulky costumes and awkwardly modeled masks, I continued to search for the perfect giant. Masks were insufficient because they did not allow for facial expression and tall actors are simply not true giants. Deciding to embody the character as a mechanical giant, I temporarily relinquished my role as director. Keeping in mind such roles as makeup artist as well as volunteer set and costume designers, I began making the sculpture in the spirit of community theatre.

In *Drama Club Dress Rehearsal*, a giant's head encrusted in pasty matte makeup towers above the stage. Gazing down upon the viewer, the giant's face appears still and contemplative. Suddenly his eyebrows, eyes and pipe begin to move. His expressions flutter, ranging from contemptuous to confused. A handmade mechanism is concealed within the giant's head. The personality of the handmade remains evident; as his eyeballs roll out of unison, the naturalistic illusion falls apart. I use variation, awkward transitions, and exaggerated surface to reference the multiple logics or hands at work that contribute to a theatrical production. Layers and layers of paint cover the giant's face, his complexion suggests that this prop has been used and reused in many theatrical productions. The giant's hair appears thinning; time has had an abject effect on this actor. The giant's costume is made from an altered dress and the floor of the stage is

made of inverted architectural molding. A set of stairs at stage left invites the viewer to enter the giant's world to become an actor on his stage.



{Figure 2: Detail of *Drama Club Dress Rehearsal*}

I specifically chose the story *Jack and the Beanstalk* because of its relationship to theatricality in early cinema, specifically the films made by Thomas Edison's production company. The 1902 film of *Jack and the Beanstalk* directed by Edwin S. Porter marks a point in cinematic history where directors chose to create theatrical narratives instead of documenting events of everyday life. In the film, the camera remains stationary, always in the frontal viewpoint of audience. The painted face merges with the painted backdrop; flesh and makeup become affixed in both the mind of the audience as well as in the identity of the actor. As described in Mike Kelly's writing on the uncanny, "...where

makeup is applied to imitate life and, in Egyptian funerary practice, this decorating impulse is continued with jewels and other precious materials until the dead body is sculpted into a god- that is, a fetish, an idealized substitution for something secret and shielded” (Kelly81).

Love Affair in the Black Maria is a sculpture that pays homage Thomas Edison’s recording studio. The sculpture’s narrative originates from the tarpaper-recording studio named The Black Maria. Romantic playfulness filled many of Edison’s films. It doesn’t seem far-reaching to fantasize about actors and actresses exchanging flirtatious glances within the studios tar walls. *Love Affair in the Black Maria*h spotlights a dissembled female giant costume strewn atop a tarpaper platform. The scene conjures feelings of bliss as well as abandonment. The prop no longer represents the role; it alludes to a private lustful narrative. The giantess’ dress is made from stage curtain fabric. The curtain ruffles are mended into the design of the dress and drape off the platform like sheets on a bed. The costume is no more than an empty sleeve, a fragment of fantasy. All that remains of the actress is a single arm stuck in the sleeve of the giantess costume.

Every actress needs a stunning pair of high heels; *Lust and Lumber* aims to cure this desire. *Lust and Lumber* fuses designer fashion with prosthetics. Combining fashion with prosthetics is a startling pairing. Prosthetics imply a permanent replacement where as fashion denotes a temporary artifice. The sculpture insists that fashion becomes necessity and prosthetics become fashion. Steel prosthetics would require a strong individual and the sheer weight would cause a lumbering stride. The entire surface of the prosthetics is raw, except for the outside of the high heels, which are polished to a

seductive sheen. The viewer becomes a voyeur privileged to raw prosthetic surfaces usually covered clothing.

I am interested in the way Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* connects the act of voyeurism with the idea of the uncanny. The viewer presses his/her face against a wooden door and peers through two small peepholes. Shielded behind the door lies the representation of a nude before an idealized painted backdrop. The uncanny body is lifelessly posed and also acting alive, arm extended and fingers grasping a flickering lamp. While researching early cinema I was surprised to find that Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* shares similarities with Edison's moving picture machine: the kinetoscope. The viewing lens of the kinetoscope and the peepholes of *Etant Donnés* both implicate the audience the viewing spectacle.

My art examines spectacle through the lens of carnival. Orchestrated awkwardness and unexpected pairings create a carnivalesque mood. The painterly application of makeup becomes abject; the repressed meets the cliché, while found materials take on bewildering roles. Further elaborating on the idea of the carnivalesque, Mikhail Bakhtin states, "Carnival is a topsy-turvy world, and it unites, intermingles, and weds the blessed with the profane, the high with the low, the giant with the dwarf, the wise man with the fool" (Kunsthau35).

The Carnavalesque is alive in my artwork; I combine the ordinary with the fantastical and the rational with the absurd. In *A Once Suspended Tableau*, I repurposed an ordinary chair, coercing its wooden structure into a prehistoric bird. In order to test the chair's ability to fly, I tossed it into the air, only for it to be broken into pieces.

The chair's seat was then sliced into thin strips, transformed into a plume of feathers. From a distance, the sculpture appears elegant in its line quality and modulated mark-making. Up close, splintered chair legs communicate ferocity. The once suspended marionette has been thrown to the floor by a merciless *deus ex machina*. *A Once Suspended Tableau*, *Drama Club Dress Rehearsal*, and *The Tranquil Sea and the Ships Deck*, all embody references and tropes from the history of theatrical productions. My most recent work shifts its focus from the history of the stage and examines how theatricality is intertwined within contemporary culture. In order to assume a role makeup must be applied and costumes must be worn. Even if the assumed role is temporary and deemed deceitful, illusion serves a purpose.



{Figure 3: detail of *Love Affair in the Black Maria*}

Transitory Sleeves



{Figure 4: Julian Eltinge as The Crinoline Girl 1910}

There is a tug and tear when the costume becomes fused with the identity of the person wearing it. Can fashion actually create self-empowerment or does it simply scream come and get it? Clothing controls the physical movement and visual appearance of one's own body thus altering the way others perceive personality. At this point clothing tangles with costume, and fashion is no longer a superficial covering. Superficiality supercedes the existence of personality and fashion becomes more than an adornment upon a body.

As we all know fashion reinvents itself. Sleeves are transitory objects, always being entered and exited. There is a mutual relationship between the sleeve and individual wearing it. Costume is an alchemical part of performance. A musician assumes a persona as soon as his/her body enters the costume. The style of the wardrobe fuses with the personality of the performer. When the Ziggy Stardust returns to the fitting room and removes his wardrobe he turns back into David Bowie. In the memory of the audience David Bowie will always be Ziggy Stardust, trapped in his celestial

costume. Where did Ziggy Stardust come from? Did he really come from outer space? The jewel encrusted collars and theatrical costumes of glam rock might seem alien at first. Align renaissance royalty and Ziggy Stardust side by side and they look like relatives.



{Figure 5: -left to right - 16th century high necked gown, Ziggy Stardust 1972, 16th century male surcoat}

Starched in Stardust examines the relationship between celebrity, fashion, and style. The sculpture is composed of a minty blue collar, a geometric vessel spattered with green paint, and a miniature Julian Eltinge. Eltinge was the first American actor to play the role of a man playing a man who dresses as a woman. Overtime he became known as the crinoline girl because of his trademark stiffened hooped skirt. In *Starched in Stardust* a miniature Eltinge sits on the floor in a contemplative pose with his eyes closed. His signature curly wig is missing, atop his head rests a green geometric vessel. The interior of the vessel is lined with a sculpted piece of sagging fabric. On top of the geometric shape rests a sleek cerulean collar. The collar fuses glam rock style with that of its

Renaissance ancestry. The entire sculpture is a circuit connecting stylistic eras and the emergence of androgyny in contemporary culture.

Separating Seams is a sculpture that flaunts its superficiality within its artificial fiberglass flesh. From a distance the sculpture appears a mix of swirling fabric and filleted skin. The form appears squeezed and pulled into an inviting pose. The pose flutters exposing the underside of the sculpture, which is stuffed with costumes ranging from a sequined Cleopatra gown to a dusty skunk outfit. Peering inside the sculpture is like sifting through a closet filled with old clothing. Eras become combined as an eighties style dress refers to the Hellenistic ruler of Egypt. The archetypal roles empower the sculpture, forcing it into an intimidating and flirtatious pose. The pose conjures images from early vaudeville dancers stretching their bodies into seductive poses. The formal action of the sculpture takes over and captures a dramatic moment. The sculpture appears to endure the physical stress of being stretched to its limits as the seams are actually separating. *Separating Seams* bursting form coalesces with historical references to create an active but allusive narrative.

Glimmer and Murmur reaches a state of physical deceptiveness. Not a single part of the sculpture is what it seems to be. Ambiguous narrative emerges as a faceted aluminum top hat teeters on the edge of a faux log. Pairing a wrinkly log with a reflective hat is creates a scene of private wonderment. The faux log was cut into four sections and the sections are arranged to create an enclosure. Out from the enclosure emerges a pink mass topped with a soggy but rigid bandana. Growth of the pink mass appears restricted by the dense red bandana. The combination of each component within the scene begins

to behave like poetry. A French patriotic hat is a departure point and no longer a decipherable reference. The glare of faceted polished aluminum engulfs the form until the hat is barely recognizable. The entire sculpture appears strangely solid, upon further examination all of the parts of made of thin materials. The artificial density obeys a logic that is otherworldly.

The sculptural objects I create invite the audience to enter a setting of suspended belief. Logics clash within a single scene. Decades contract; fragments of historic costumes are reinvented, forged and coated with new materials and meaning. Materials escape the banality of the everyday and reach elastic limits. A reflective top hat has the ability change roles and become metallic postmodernist architecture. Ivan the Terrible's costume is remade stretched with glam rock style. The made becomes confused with the found as well as the altered. Within in a single scene realities shift as fiction merges with non-fiction, and the pictorial circulates with the real.



{Figure 6: *Glimmer and Murmur*}

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Education

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- B.F.A. Sculpture / Painting, Tyler School of Art Temple University, 2006.

Awards

- 2006 International Research Grant, Awarded by New York Life Insurance Company and The India Tourism Office.
- 2006 Presidential Scholar Award, Temple University, "grade point average 3.75 or higher".
- 2006 Sculpture Project Award, Temple University, "outstanding work in the field of sculpture".
- 2005 Science and Art grant, Franklin Institute.
- 2004 Merit Scholarship, Millersburg Art Association.
- 2002 Merit Scholarship, Tyler School of Art.
- 2002-2006 Dean's List, Temple University.

Group Exhibitions

- 2007 *Options*, Edison Place Gallery, Washington Project for the Arts Corcoran, Washington DC
- 2007 *Company Picnic*, Metro Space Gallery, Richmond VA
- 2007 *Introducing The Commonwealth Bricoleurs*, University of Virginia, The Off Grounds Gallery, Charlottesville VA
- 2006 *Crises*, University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School of Communication, Philadelphia.
- 2006 *Debate Team*, FAB Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond VA.
- 2005 *Science Art Jam*, Franklin Institute Science Museum, Philadelphia

Bibliography

- 2007 Paul Brewer, *Options 2007*, WPA Corcoran, 2007

Publications

- 2008 Curious, VCU press, edition 2, 2007
- 2007 Curious, VCU press, edition 1, 2007

Professional Experience

- 2008 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Robotics, VCU, Richmond VA.
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- 2007 Artist Assistant for Michael Jones Mckean, Richmond VA.
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- 2007 Summer Studio Program Shop Technician
- 2007 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Art for Non-Majors VCU, Richmond VA.
- 2006 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Basic Sculpture, VCU, Richmond VA.
- 2006 Artist Assistant for Nathaniel Rackowe, Richmond VA.
- 2006 Fabricator for Anderson Gallery, Richmond VA.
- 2005 Summer Art teaching position, Line Mountain School District, Dalmatia PA.
- 2004 Artist Assistant for Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, *Pandemonium*, Philadelphia

Articles and Reviews

- 2007 *Perish the Thought*, Washington City Paper, Kriston Capps, Oct 26
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